



Wellness

Setting up to work from home

A practical guide to ergonomics

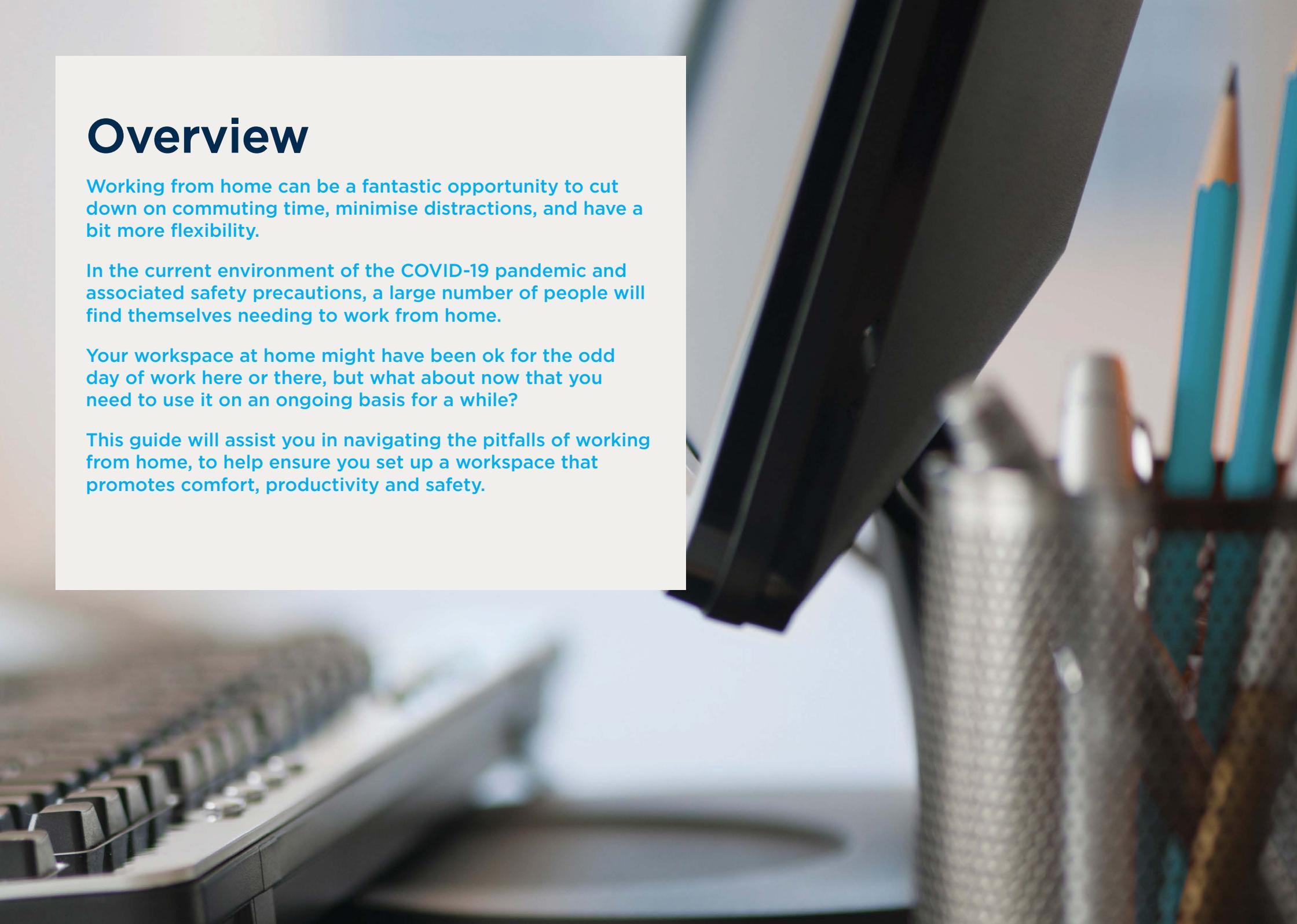
Overview

Working from home can be a fantastic opportunity to cut down on commuting time, minimise distractions, and have a bit more flexibility.

In the current environment of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated safety precautions, a large number of people will find themselves needing to work from home.

Your workspace at home might have been ok for the odd day of work here or there, but what about now that you need to use it on an ongoing basis for a while?

This guide will assist you in navigating the pitfalls of working from home, to help ensure you set up a workspace that promotes comfort, productivity and safety.



Ten key tips to setting up a home office space

1. Choose a suitable desk or table to work on

Wherever possible, the desk/surface that you work on needs to have a shallow surface top like this pictured here (table/surface depth shown by the white arrow).

Not a deep surface top like this picture to the right.



The issue with working on a desk or table with a deep surface is that it can prevent you from sitting high enough to rest your arms in a comfortable position. So, your shoulders may end up hunched and over time that can make you tight, stiff and sore in the neck and shoulder area.

When choosing a desk or table, try to ensure that it's:

- a good height for you - if it's too high, consider using a footrest to allow your lower body to stay in a more supported position.
- large enough for all the things you need to access while you work.



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2. Use a decent chair with adequate back support

A stool or dodgy dining room chair might have been okay for the odd day here or there but is not a good option for longer term. Ideally for a home workspace, you need a chair with decent back support – one that allows you to recline slightly back at around 10-20 degrees.

Try to ensure the back support is comfortable and the chair height can be adjusted to your needs. Pictured is a good example of a suitable chair.

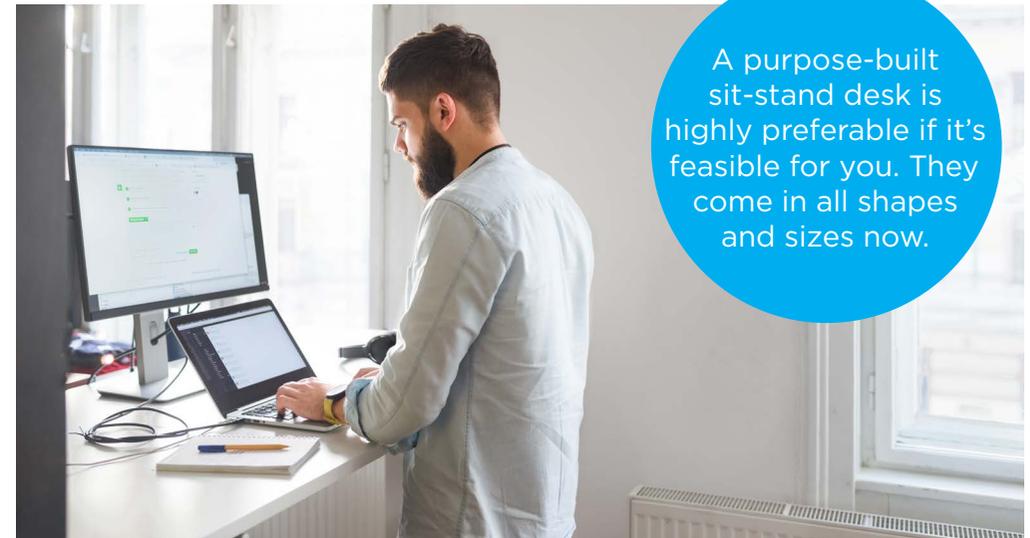


3. If you are used to a sit-to-stand desk at work, consider setting one up at home.

Many office workers now have access to sit-stand workstations and use them to get natural variation in their posture during the working day.

If you were used to that at your workplace, consider setting one up to do the same at home.

There are lots of options – simple ones that sit on your desk and can be packed away at the end of the day, through to whole desks that raise and lower with the touch of a button.



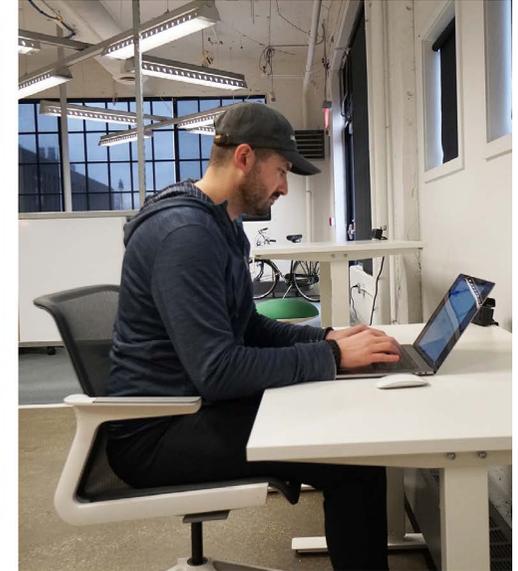
A purpose-built sit-stand desk is highly preferable if it's feasible for you. They come in all shapes and sizes now.

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4. Don't just work off a laptop screen alone.

The surest way to develop a sore neck is to slump over a laptop for hours on end. A laptop riser is a must for laptop workers, combined with an external keyboard and mouse / track pad.

Setting your laptop up properly, as shown, allows you to relax back into the chair and look straight ahead with your head balanced over your base of support.



5. Try to separate yourself from the domestic part of the house.

It's hard to keep focused when you are staring at dirty dishes, or the like. If possible, and space allows, try to set yourself up where your domestic life does not creep into your thinking too much.

From a wellbeing point of view, it's good to try to have some delineation between work and home. If possible, set up your workspace in a dedicated area of the house where work time can easily be separated from home time. This is important for you to be able to focus sufficiently on your work and for when you finish up for the day.



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6. Be mindful of occupational health and safety standards.

Your employer has a duty of care to, so far as is reasonably practicable, provide a working environment for you that is safe and without risks to health. If you need to work from home and don't feel that your set up is up to scratch, then let them know. Employees also have to take reasonable care of their own health and safety. This means you might need to consider more in setting up and maintaining your home workspace than you might normally need to consider at your workplace. For example:

- Do you have a smoke detector installed nearby, and is it in working order?
- Do you have adequate storage to keep your documents and files organised?
- Is information security compromised in any way?
- Are there any trip hazards?
- Are the exits clear in case you need to evacuate?
- Are there any electrical hazards?



7. Adjust your screen for your height.

The key element of the screen position is that it promotes good posture. Many people work too far away from their screens. This is not recommended as it encourages you to creep forward with your head which can lead to poor posture through the back and neck.

As shown in the diagram below, unless advised otherwise by a suitably-qualified health professional, the screen/s should not be more than your fingertips away (i.e. you should be able to reach out and just touch the screen, without leaning forward).

The top of the screen should ideally be at around eye height (i.e. your eye level meeting the top of the screen). There can be some flexibility with this though, depending on your individual needs. For example, people with bifocals who look through the lower part of their glasses should ideally place the screen a little lower. Others find a slightly higher screen is more comfortable for their neck. As long as your head is in a comfortable, neutral position and not angled up or down then you should be okay.



Isn't being close to the screen bad for my eyes?

Modern screens are friendlier on the eyes than they used to be. If glare is an issue, angle the screen/s and change the background light if you can to help eliminate it. If the screen feels a little too bright, then adjust the brightness level on the screen to make it more comfortable. Also remember to break from looking at the screen periodically to give your eyes a rest and a chance to focus on things at different distances. Moving the screen far away from you is generally not a good ergonomic set up. This encourages you to lean forward to focus on the screen. This can be one of the most common causes of forward head posture leading to tight neck muscles. Bring the screen to you, not you to the screen!

What if i have two screens?

If you have two screens, then it's best to decide if you are going to work predominantly off one screen and have the other as a backup; or work 50/50 off both screens. For option 1, set yourself up to face the main screen and have the other screen right next to it (either side is ok, depends on your preference). For option 2, set yourself up to face the junction between the two screens, which ideally should have no gap between them. Ensure you can easily turn to face either screen (using your chair to turn, not your body).

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8. Keep your keyboard flat.

- As mentioned earlier, try to work with an external keyboard, rather than your laptop
- Generally, have the keyboard as flat as manageable (keeps the wrist at approximately a 10-20% angle (similar to the angle for a handshake)
- Consider a mini keyboard (no number tab on the right side) as this allows you to keep the mouse closer to the keys and helps avoid shoulder strain.
- Favour soft touch keyboards that can be easily used. Some require a hard force to operate which can cumulate over time and lead to increased arm and neck tension.



9. Ensure adequate lighting.

The general standard for lighting in office environments is 320- 400 LUX for office work. There are free apps that allow you to measure this.

Note that this standard range assumes significant use of hard copy documents. Workspaces that are primarily computer-based are better designed to have lower lighting in the desk/table area and brighter lighting in other areas and walkways.

Lighting levels in workspaces are best linked to the tasks done. Higher levels are generally associated with tasks where fine detail is needed.



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10. Mouse tips

The key for your mouse is that it feels comfortable, is a good size for your hand and is easy to use. Some types of mouse are designed to bring their action closer to the midline (trackball, trackpad, roller mouse). Other types aim to make your arm and wrist more comfortable (vertical mouse, 45-degree mouse).

One key aspect of using a mouse is that you are not reaching away from your body too far to move it. Prioritise the space for your mouse on your desk and make it as close to the midline as practical to do so.



For more information on office ergonomics...

Sustained working from home can be challenging, particularly if you have children who have been known to spill their breakfast on your keyboard!

Use the ten tips above to help ensure your workspace set up is comfortable, safe and promotes productivity. If you have any questions or concerns, check your company's OH&S policies and/or contact your HR department for further advice.

For more information on office ergonomics, check out our other resources:

- [Bupa Break guide for guidance on how to use movement and exercises to support you when spending long periods doing desk work](#)

